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Decolonial Developments: Participatory Politics and Experimental Poetics in Ferreira Gullar's Writing 1957-1975

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Abstract

This article examines the relationship between radical poetics and politics under the Brazilian dictatorship. It focuses on Ferreira Gullar's poetry from the late 1950s through the mid-1970s, alongside his critical essay, Avant-Garde and Underdevelopment. This period of the poet's career encapsulates both formally experimental and politically engaged poetry, including concrete and neoconcrete poems, and later, committed lyrics that accompanied the poet's work with the Brazilian Communist Party. While these two periods have been characterized as aesthetically and politically opposed, this essay posits that Gullar's career illuminates an alternative to the long held split between committed and experimental vanguards. It draws on Walter D. Mignolo and Rolando Vazquez's work on decolonial aesthetics to establish the ways in which Gullar's sense-prizing poetic experiments arise from "the social and cultural characteristics proper to" Brazil that Gullar later describes in Avant-Garde and Underdevelopment. Rather than antagonistic, Gullar's early experimentalisms and later political commitment can be read as part of a broader decolonial arc within his career that unites the experimental and the engagé through a prolonged, if evolving, poetic investment in participation and experience.

In twentieth century Brazil, experimental writing—and artistic vanguardism, generally—was bound up with what we might now call questions of cultural decolonization. During the country's military dictatorship that began in 1964, and which lasted for 21 years, considerations

of the purpose of art became especially pressing and poets in Brazil questioned not only the value of formal avant-garde experimentation in the face of a restrictive regime at home, but the ways in which experimental writing reiterated vectors of cultural and economic power from abroad. Ferreira Gullar's polemical 1969 essay, *Vanguarda e subdesenvolvimento* (Avant-Garde and Underdevelopment), addresses these concerns. Gullar had a long and prominent career as a theorist, cultural critic, and poet in Brazil. Around the time of his essay's publication, he was producing politically committed, lyrical poems that reflected the emancipatory theories outlined in *Avant-Garde and Underdevelopment*. But, a decade prior, he had also produced some of the country's most experimental writing under the auspices of concrete poetry and, later, neoconcretism. This article will address the ways in which both Gullar's experimental poetics and his committed writing are animated by modes of decolonial politics, for which participation and experience play important roles.

Gullar's concern for the ways in which poetry could challenge colonial and imperial power relations is part of a longer arc of decolonial determination animating Brazilian poetics in the twentieth century. Oswald de Andrade's "Manifesto antropófago" (Cannibalist Manifesto) is perhaps the most famous attempt within Brazilian literature to address this problem. In the manifesto, the poet that Charles Perrone calls "the foremost polemicist, iconoclast, and manifesto-maker of *modernismo*" uses the metaphor of cannibalism to propose an alternative to the notion that Brazilian aesthetic traditions were derivative of the European (1996, 9). De Andrade's essay draws upon the wartime cannibalism of Brazil's native Tupi people, in which "eating one's enemies" allowed the devourer to then "absorb their forces" (Perrone 1996, 11). As Perrone describes, "in literature, this would be understood as a critical assimilation of foreign (or even nonliterary) information and experiences for reelaboration in local terms" (1996, 11).

The legacy of Oswald de Andrade's cannibalistic metaphor and manifesto, was carried through to concrete poetry, a movement that Gullar was associated with early on in his career. While the core group of concrete poets—Décio Pignatari, and brothers Haroldo and Augusto de Campos—were known for their formally experimental approach to poetry, their work can also be understood on decolonial terms in that, as Haroldo¹ writes, it “sustain[ed] radical avant-garde proposals on the language level” and exhibited a degree of formal experimentation that positioned the practice at the very furthest reaches of the global vanguard (de Campos 1997, 16). This fact assured Brazilian poetry's highly visible international profile, despite its origins in an “underdeveloped” or (in Haroldo's words) “ex-centric” country (de Campos 1997, 13). Discussing de Andrade's legacy, Haroldo writes that, “I have always seen as a sociologically ingenuous fallacy any mechanistic reduction, any self-punishing fatalism, which affirms that to an economically underdeveloped country there must correspond an underdeveloped literature, as if by conditioned reflex” (de Campos 1986, 43).

This claim proposes an alternative to the assumption that the legacy of colonial power constituted in the economic sphere must necessarily extend into the cultural. *Avant-Garde and Underdevelopment* would make a similar claim, but would also condemn concrete poetry's particular mode of experimental writing. Concrete poetry prioritized the material features of language over its discursive possibilities, something Gullar would come to characterize as too-heavily importing avant-garde strategies from abroad and insufficiently capable of accounting for Brazil's local reality.

Avant-Garde and Underdevelopment identifies the European roots of formalism and avant-gardism and argues for an emancipatory, international art and literature that will be “constituída das particularidades nacionais – países capitalistas desenvolvidos, países socialistas,

países subdesenvolvidos, colônias” (constituted from national particularities—developed capitalist countries, socialist countries, underdeveloped countries, colonies).² As Gullar describes, “isso não quer dizer que o poeta deva abdicar de pesquisar a linguagem e de buscar formas novas de expressão, mas que essa busca deve ser feita visando às necessidades reais da poesia dentro do contexto histórico-social” (that isn’t to say that poets should stop investigating language or searching for new forms of expression, but that that search should be aimed at the real necessities of poetry within the socio-historical context) of Brazil (1978, 99). With this in mind, Gullar would eventually equate concrete poetry with a specious and dislocated formalism, ill-adapted to the Brazilian situation.

Gullar’s dictatorship-era poetry includes clear, lyrical, and political poems aimed at illuminating the material conditions of life in “underdeveloped” Brazil. But, his poetic career has its roots in concrete poetry, and includes further production of haptic, participatory poems whose degree of experimentation exceeds even what was typical of concrete poetry. Gullar thus provides a productive case for reconsidering the split between committed and experimental vanguards in the context of Brazil. This is in part because his career spanned the extremes of this spectrum, and in a relatively short period of time. But, as this article will argue, Gullar’s rejection of formal experimentation in favor of a more direct and overtly political poetry can be reexamined in light of recent theoretical explorations of what Walter D. Mignolo and Rolando Vazquez call “decolonial aestheSis,” (as opposed to aesthetics) which involves “naming and articulating practices that challenge and subvert the hegemony of modern/colonial” modes of sensing and perceiving (2013).

Gullar’s critical writing from the 1960s, and his turn away from the formally experimental poetry that characterized his practice at the end of the prior decade, are often

understood to mark a break or “impasse” in the poet’s work (Small 2012, 98), even by the poet himself. This understanding of Gullar’s poetic transformation suggests an incompatibility between formally radical and politically engaged modes of writing. Yet in spite of his self-evaluation, Gullar’s poetry maintains a consistent set of interests across this divide, including attention to the materiality of language, sense perception, participation, and experience. Though these interests manifest differently in each era of Gullar’s poetic trajectory, they provide a bridge between the experimental and the engagé in the poet’s work. As such, Gullar’s early experimental poetry can be read together with his politically committed poetry and understood as giving rise—via an emphasis on participation and experience—to the decolonial and emancipatory politics that would guide the poet in later years. As a result, Gullar’s poetic practice can illustrate one possibility for de-antagonizing formally experimental and politically engaged writing and in the face of state repression at home and cultural and economic marginalization on the world scale.

To this end, this study will examine Gullar’s poetry from the late 1950s through the mid-1970s, alongside his critical essay, *Avant-Garde and Underdevelopment*. It will first examine Gullar’s formally experimental poetry during his concrete and neoconcrete periods. Subsequently, it will consider the politically engaged lyrics that constitute the collection *Dentro da noite veloz* (*Within the Speeding Night*), first published in 1975. While these two periods of the poet’s career have been understood as aesthetically and politically opposed, this essay posits that Gullar’s career sustains a focus on poetic participation and experience that “contributes to making visible decolonial subjectivities” (Mignolo and Vazquez 2013). This is true of Gullar’s politically engaged lyrics in the ways they attend thematically (and formally, as I will show) to the material realities of living under the Brazilian dictatorship. However, it can also be said of

Gullar's earlier experiments with poetic materiality. Because the poet's formally experimental poetry during that earlier period prioritized—and indeed constituted itself from—the sensory engagement of participating readers in Brazil, it insisted, in its own way, on attending to the particular, concrete situation “de uma ex colônia e de um país subdesenvolvido” (of an ex-colony and underdeveloped country) (Gullar 1978, 45). Gullar's career can thus be viewed as consistently emphasizing Brazilian poetic experience and participation, an emphasis that insists, as Mignolo and Vazquez write, on a “diversity of ideas and ways of relating to the world that do not belong to the genealogy of the Western tradition” (2013). This differs from the kind of political participation that characterized Gullar's work with the Brazilian Communist Party and other cultural institutions during the dictatorship, but it nevertheless constitutes a form of sensory, and political, participation that demonstrates a link between experimental writing and decolonial poetics.

On the Politics of Radical Poetics

Before the military dictatorship began in 1964, formal experimentation flourished in Brazilian poetics. Examples included modernist poets such as Oswald de Andrade; concrete poets Décio Pignatari, Augusto, and Haroldo de Campos; and the interdisciplinary neoconcrete group, of which Ferreira Gullar was the most prominent poet. He contributed to founding neoconcretism in 1959, but Gullar's early poetic practice was affiliated with concrete poetry and his poems from this era demonstrate their affinities with the movement's precepts. These included the poetic determination to use “the word (sound, visual form, fixed concepts) as compositional material rather than a vehicle of interpretation of the objective world,” a determination that, for the concrete poem, means “its structure is its true content” (de Campos

2007, 237). This focus on the materiality of poetic language would extend to Gullar's neoconcrete poetry, and both movements experimented with ways of emphasizing the look, sound, and (for neoconcretism) feel of words on the one hand, and restraining the discursive function of poetry on the other.

Something akin to this notion is on display in Gullar's 1957 poem, "verde erva":

verde verde verde

verde verde verde

verde verde verde

verde verde verde erva (Gullar 2015, 102)

(green green green

green green green

green green green

green green green grass) (Gullar 2013, 91)³

This poem conforms to many of concrete poetry's core concepts. By way of words' repetition, it prioritizes their shared visual and sonic features—the letters v, e, and r, and their corresponding sounds—and draws attention to features they don't hold in common—the letters and sounds of d and a. As Gullar describes, "a matriz do poema foi a identificação fonética e semântica entre as palavras verde e erva—uma estava na outra como forma e significado" (the poem was based on phonetic and semantic identification between the words *verde* and *erva*—one was inside the other as both form and meaning). (2015a, 43)

As Gullar indicates, a concrete poem such as "verde erva" does open itself to meaningful possibilities, what Haroldo de Campos refers to as "traces of content," (2007, 237) that attach to

the words even as the poem prioritizes its material qualities. Haroldo notes that these traces “exist in an art such as poetry, whose instrument—the word—unlike color or sounds, cannot be treated as an entirely neutral element but rather carries an immediate cluster of meanings” (2007, 237). Still, the meaning generated by a concrete poem is often broad, open, and associative in the way it is in “verde erva.” Green and grass are suggested, but decontextualized, and these meanings themselves are largely subordinated to the poem’s material features.

Even before Gullar turned to his politically committed and less formally experimental poetry, this kind of broad and unspecific meaning would be frustrating for efforts to use poetry as a way of capturing life in Brazil. Gullar recalls about “verde erva”: “this poem was inspired by the town square in Alcântara, Maranhão, which I visited in 1950, back when almost no one lived there. I had the sensation that the herbage that covered the square grew there for absolutely nobody” (2007, 121). Alcântara is just across the São Marcos bay from São Luis do Maranhão, the town where Gullar grew up in the poor Northeastern part of Brazil. As is likely obvious from “verde erva’s” extreme brevity, none of the haunting nostalgia of this located memory from Gullar’s past can, or does, come across in a cold read of the poem. This begins to point to some of the ways in which concrete poetry’s political potential will later come under scrutiny. This kind of poetry was highly formally experimental, and served to resist the notion that Brazilian literature could be understood as “underdeveloped.” Yet, concrete poetry was also formally limited in its ability to capture the kinds of contextual significance that might also give way to more direct forms of political intervention.

Concrete poems such as “verde erva” also disrupted the necessity of reading left to right and top to bottom in ways that were unsatisfying for Gullar. “Verde erva,” for example, invites a mode of reading in which a near-instantaneous apprehension of the whole poem is possible. This

feature stymied Gullar's attempt "to create a poem that might end up constructing a visual form and would also oblige a word-by-word reading" (Gullar 2012, 70). Among other reasons, this fact would lead Gullar to create a series of poems that could better facilitate a directed, if still unconventional, reading process. Notably, this included experimentation with haptic participation, something that, in turn, contributed to his break with concrete poetry and the founding of the interdisciplinary movement known as neoconcretism.

Concrete poetry's formal experiments largely prioritized the selection and arrangement of words on the page, but Gullar's neoconcrete poetry may be understood as even more experimental. His work from the period included sculptural poems containing just a handful of words and room-sized installation poetry meant to function as a fully immersive sensory experience. Broadly speaking, the neoconcretes differentiated themselves from the concretes by prioritizing a model of art-making which favored the embodied participation of both artist and spectator/reader/participant. This was as opposed to "um modelo objetivo, reproduzível por um processo técnico que prescindisse da participação de seu criador" (an objective model, reproducible via a technical process that had no need for the creator's participation), an approach that characterized certain portions of the concrete project (Brito 1999, 43).⁴ Also, while concretism, like neoconcretism, counted both poetry and visual art among its branches, neoconcretism was a much more deliberately interdisciplinary movement, with a great deal of overlap between poetic and visual art practices. As Renato Rodrigues da Silva points out, Gullar, as the group's strongest theoretical voice, "desenvolveu suas propostas não somente em oposição ao Concretismo, mas também afinado com as obras de Lygia Clark" (developed his proposals not just in contrast to concretism, but also in tune with the work of [artist] Lygia Clark) whose

neoconcrete artworks often involved a participant's manual handling and manipulation of material objects (2016, 3).

Gullar's neoconcrete experiments would culminate with 1959's "Poema enterrado" (Buried Poem), an immersive, participatory work considered by Gullar to be a poem. As he describes, the "Buried Poem" consisted of:

uma sala de três metros por três, no subsolo da nova casa da família de Hélio Oiticica, na Gávea Pequena, onde se entrava descendo por uma escada que levava à porta do poema. Abria-se a porta, entrava-se e encontrava-se, ao centro, um cubo vermelho de 50 cm x 50 cm; debaixo deste havia outro cubo, de cor verde, de 30 cm x 30 cm e, finalmente, debaixo deste, um cubo bem menor, branco, de 10 cm x 10 cm, no qual estava escrito: rejuvenesça. (2015a, 46-47)

a three by three meter underground room, at [artist] Hélio Oiticica's family home in Gávea Pequena. You would enter by going down a set of steps that would take you to the door of the poem. You'd open the door, enter, and there in the middle of the room you'd find a 50 cm x 50 cm red cube, under which would be another cube, a green one, 30 cm x 30 cm, and finally, under that one, an even smaller white cube measuring 10 cm x 10 cm, on which was written: rejuvenate.

This poem is on the far end of what might generally be considered poetry, and represents an extreme degree of experimentation within the domain of writing. On the one hand, it contains only one word. This is not altogether a major distinction between neoconcrete poetry and the

similarly minimal concrete poetry that preceded it, but does mark a dramatic departure from the lyrical model that dominated earlier generations of Brazilian poetry, and would return later in Gullar's own work. In addition to its spare use of language and omission of a lyrical subject, the "Buried Poem" also makes significant departures from the usual support of poetry and writing—the page. Instead, it incorporates a wide range of material components that include the ground in which the "Buried Poem" was dug, a door, three colored cubes, and the "reader" herself who likewise becomes a part of the poem upon entering it.

Gullar's neoconcrete poetry can be understood as among Brazil's, and the Americas,' most experimental writing. Christopher Dunn describes how

the neoconcretist project insinuated an alternative based on participation through sensorial experience. While still working with a language of abstraction, the neoconcretists sought to reincorporate elements of emotion and affect that assigned primacy to the sensorial experience of the spectator-participant who would participate actively in the production of meaning (2016, 75).

Neoconcrete poetry thus radically redefined poetry, the materials it could be made from, and the very processes by which it would be read or written. Writing would come to severely limit its use of language and welcome all kinds of other material components that might (or might not) contribute to the poem's meaning. Reading would come to be a sensory experience prioritizing sight, sound, and touch in ways beyond the incidental. Poetry would, in turn, be both constituted by and located in the experience of the sensing reader.

This feature of neoconcretism has often been interpreted in relation to the writing of phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty, whose work the neoconcretists were reading concurrently with their experimentation with reader or spectator participation. As Pedro Erber

describes, for Merleau-Ponty, “bodily perception was not simply a preliminary stage of knowledge but the very essence of human consciousness”—a value shared by the neoconcretists who mobilized just such embodied and sensory perception as a redefined means of reading or viewing a work of poetry or visual art (2014, 93).

There is no doubt that Merleau-Ponty was influential for the neoconcretists, including or perhaps especially, for Gullar.⁵ But, Gullar’s experimental poetry can also be understood as overlapping with the concept of decolonial aesthetics as elaborated by Mignolo and Vazquez. They describe how “Modern aesthetics have played a key role in configuring a canon, a normativity that enabled the disdain and the rejection of other forms of aesthetic practices, or, more precisely, other forms of aestheSis, of sensing and perceiving” (2013). Even though it engaged with French phenomenology, Gullar’s experimental poetry during the neoconcrete period could only come about via the specific, and contingent sensory experiences of participating readers in Brazil. This carries the necessary effect of disrupting the inherited norms of how poetry ought to, or can be, perceived and of fiercely locating poetry in the specific, historical, material, and experiential context of the sensing reader. This effect constitutes one form of decolonial poetics rooted in experience and perception, and suggests a link between Gullar’s formally experimental period and his later turn toward “direct communication with the masses based on discursive clarity and social protest” (Dunn 2013, 234).

On the Poetics of Radical Politics

As I have noted, these two periods of the poet’s career are often understood to be somewhat, if not entirely, at odds. This is even true for Gullar himself. Shortly after the “Buried Poem” was dug in the yard of Hélio Oiticica’s family home, Gullar began to question his highly

experimental poetic practices and eventually, their political efficacy. He reflects that, after the “Buried Poem’s” site was rained out, “não voltei mais à casa dos Oiticica e, pouco tempo depois, afastei-me do grupo neoconcreto, por ir trabalhar em Brasília. Mas não apenas por isso. Comecei a perceber que aquele caminho se esgotara e não desejava continuar nele” (I didn’t return to the Oiticicas’ house, and shortly after that, I parted with the neoconcrete group because I had moved to Brasília for work. But not just because of that. I started to realize that that path had exhausted itself, and I didn’t care to continue on it” (Gullar 2015a, 47).

These concerns were aesthetic as well as political. Though Gullar always insisted that his work during neoconcretism was to be considered poetry, the highly interdisciplinary nature of his practice at the time also suggests an affinity between the written or poetic and other not necessarily linguistic categories of art-making such as installation, sculpture, and conceptual art. In addition to questions about political efficacy that became more pressing for Gullar in the years following his neoconcrete period, these features of his experimental poetry also provoked reflections as to the very nature of his poetic practice. Gullar has recalled asking himself: “Was such a drastic reduction of the participation of verbal language in the spatial poems—whittled down to a single word—not diminishing my potentialities as a poet?” (2007, 129). The question of Gullar’s experimental writing was thus one of commitment on two fronts. On the one hand, Gullar wondered if the extreme brevity of his neoconcrete poems detracted from his commitment to the very genre of poetry. On the other hand, this same brevity and neoconcretism’s concern with art that would be “liberada de sua intenção representativa” (liberated from its intention to represent) was a limiting factor for the kinds of political messages that might be conveyed in poetry (1959, 1).

Irene Small writes that, “by 1961, neoconcretism had already begun to dissipate as a definite movement” and, a year later, “Gullar had joined the leadership of the Center for Popular Culture (CPC), a leftist cultural organization linked to the National Student Union, which sought to bring culture ‘to the people.’” As Dunn describes, this “entailed agit-prop events, political consciousness-raising, and direct communication with the public-at-large” (2013, 234). Small notes that this initiative was “much in line with the increasingly leftist sympathies of the ISEB [Superior Institute of Brazilian Studies]” a think tank devoted to Brazilian developmentalism that “moved increasingly towards a leftist model of national development in the years after 1958” (2012, 96, 95).

The Brazilian developmentalist project saw then-president Juscelino Kubitschek announcing a plan to modernize Brazil by “fifty years in five” and spurred the building of a new, modern(ist) federal capital in the city of Brasília, taking over from Rio de Janeiro in 1960. Eduardo Ledesma writes that “seeking freedom from economic subservience to the North, from former colonial powers, was a project shared by most nations in the region; often the route to such economic independence was understood to involve industrial development, import substitution, and other nationalist policies” (2016, 246). The project of neoconcretism’s predecessor, concrete poetry, is sometimes understood as analogous to these concurrent developmentalist aims, and the concrete poets’ emphasis on creating a modern, international status for Brazilian letters, as well as their use of a pared-down, design-friendly aesthetic, does highlight the entanglement of the two nationally-invested projects. It should be pointed out, though, that concrete poetry’s national interest was not a mere mirror of state-level politics. Ledesma reminds us that “the concrete poets’ position shifted over time toward a stance increasingly critical of the state,” and argues that “the radical shift in notions of poetry, reading,

and viewing brought about by the concretists was linked to other emancipatory changes that took place within Latin American society as it was swept by anti-imperialist fever” (2016, 246, 248). Neoconcretism, on the other hand, can be thought of, in some ways, as “less politically engaged than concretism since it maintained a detached attitude in relation to the modernizing developmentalist project” (Dunn 2016, 75).

Reframing neoconcretism in terms of decolonial aesthetics opens alternative possibilities for understanding the group’s relationship to politics. However, it’s also the case, as Small suggests, that a post-neoconcrete Gullar did meet up with a developmentalist ideology after he had broken with the vanguard poetic experimentation characteristic of his neoconcrete period. By this time, developmentalism, at least as understood by the ISEB, had morphed from economic nationalism into a more progressive and auto-critical mode of thought.

Among other initiatives, the ISEB produced “a series of alternative history textbooks for middle-school students titled the ‘New History of Brazil’” that “offered a revisionist neo-Marxist narrative counter to official historiography” (Small 2012, 95). This series insisted:

that the identity of the nation must be understood in terms of the wider development of global capitalism and the struggles against it, which together provided history with its directional force. Only by understanding this integrated history of dialectical episodes, the authors argued, could Brazil’s dependency and underdevelopment be adequately theorized and overcome” (Small 2012, 95).

An analogous understanding of the international as constituted in a dialectic with national arts would motivate Gullar’s thinking at this time, and would contribute to *Avant-Garde and*

Underdevelopment. Similarly structured, Gullar's essay sought to narrate the history of art within a broader Marxist framework, arguing that "a problemática da arte é uma parte da problemática geral da História em cada época, em cada sociedade" (the problematic of art is a part of the general problematic of History in every era, in every society) (1978, 35).

Interested specifically in the question of the avant-garde and its applicability in an "underdeveloped" nation like Brazil, *Avant-Garde and Underdevelopment* asked whether "o que é 'vanguarda' num país desenvolvido será obrigatoriamente vanguarda num país subdesenvolvido" (what is avant-garde in a developed country should be automatically avant-garde in an underdeveloped one) (1978, 35). The answer, it would turn out, was no. Instead of the formalist experimentalism that characterized concrete poetry, *Avant-Garde and Underdevelopment* would propose that "a verdadeira vanguarda artística, num país subdesenvolvido, é aquela que, buscando o novo, busca a libertação do homem" (the real artistic vanguard in an underdeveloped country⁶ is that which, in seeking the new, seeks human liberation). And this is something that can only be achieved "a partir de sua situação concreta, internacional e nacional" (from its concrete, international, and national situation) (1978, 23).

In the essay, as Small explains, "Gullar examined the inception of the avant-garde as an integrated historical phenomenon in Europe, one dependent on the emergence and consolidation of the bourgeoisie in the wake of the French Revolution" (2012, 97). This historical account of the avant-garde can help us understand why Gullar might have felt that his experimental poetics during neoconcretism had ultimately "exhausted" themselves, as they might later be understood not just as politically impotent in terms of their ability to complexly express the realities of life in Brazil, but also as extending problematically from European formal experimentation. At the same time, *Avant-Garde and Underdevelopment* shares a concern of decolonial aesthetics in that

it shows formal experimentation's "genealogy in western modernity," and aims to "transform the universal validity claims of western concepts and turn them into concepts historically situated" (Mignolo and Vazquez 2013).

Gullar did undergo a poetic transformation in tune with his increasingly active politics, but in *Avant-Garde and Underdevelopment*, Gullar is surprisingly protective of his own neoconcrete experiments. In an interview years later, he makes the argument that, though neoconcretism was "without a doubt" avant-garde, "it was neither a copy nor an importation of aesthetic criteria imagined in another place to respond to needs that were different from ours" (Gullar 2012, 93). Instead, concrete poetry bears the brunt of *Avant-Garde and Underdevelopment's* critique—a critique of the fit and purpose of experimental formalisms in the Brazilian context.

In the essay, political questions about Brazil's relationship to the "developed" world are entangled with politics at home, and with questions relating to what role art, broadly construed, should play in a society under oppression. The dictatorship that began in 1964, five years prior to the publishing of *Avant-Garde and Underdevelopment*, was in 1969 significantly tightening its grip on Brazilian society. This factor played a role in Gullar's turn toward more committed and Brazil-invested theories of art that cast the formal experimentation of concrete poetry as incompatible with contemporary politics in Brazil.

In *Avant-Garde and Underdevelopment*, Gullar remarks on the influence of the coup on the relationships between politics and artistic practice in Brazil. He writes that in the years immediately preceding the dictatorship, the young leftists involved (as he was) with the Center for Popular Culture (CPC),

aproximavam-se dos movimentos de “vanguarda” modernos pelo menos num ponto: na rejeição dos princípios estéticos e da arte como ocupação acadêmica. Colocavam o problema do distanciamento da arte e do povo, e se propunham competir com os meios de comunicação de massa buscando formas de comunicação populares e indo com suas obras aos sindicatos, às favelas, aos subúrbios, às vilas operárias, às usinas de açúcar, às faculdades (1978, 22)

(aligned with the modern “avant-garde” movements in at least one way: in rejecting aesthetic principles and art as an academic occupation. They sought to overcome the distance between art and the people, and intended to compete with mass media by seeking out forms of popular communication and taking their artworks to the workers’ unions, to the slums, to the suburbs, to the workers’ villages, to the sugar mills, to the colleges.)

Gullar would later reflect that “nós nem fizemos boa literatura durante o CPC, nem bom teatro, nem atingimos as massas” (during the CPC, we neither made good literature, nor good theater, nor did we reach the masses) (Gullar and Ridenti 2012, 10). But, the period inspired a profound shift in the poet who found himself not only in the company of those taking part in the left-leaning cultural organization, but as Eleanora Ziller Camenietzki points out, among “milhares de operários e construtores” (thousands of workers and builders) who had recently migrated to the newly founded capital.

When the coup took place, then, it catalyzed for Gullar and others the necessity of seeking out new opportunities for political and poetical commitment. Though it put an end to the outreach experiments of the CPC, the dictatorship also had the opposite effect:

enquanto o novo regime procurou deliberadamente “despolitizar” o País (liquidando as lideranças políticas, os partidos e pondo o Congresso sob controle), o teatro, o cinema, a música popular, a poesia e mesmo a pintura assumiram o papel de “repolitizá-lo” e já agora em termos muito mais amplos – como participação de autores – do que antes.

(1978, 22)

(while the new regime deliberately sought to “depoliticize” the country, [getting rid of political leaders and parties, and putting the congress under its control], theater, cinema, popular music, poetry, and even painting assumed the role of “repoliticizing” it and, now on much broader terms—for example authors’ participation—than before.)

For Gullar, this provoked a further political transformation that sought not just to bring art out of its academic or elite confines (something that had been central to neoconcretism as well) but, specifically, “denunciar a ditadura no campo intelectual, mostrar que é um poder ilegítimo e contrário à cultura, à criatividade” (to denounce the dictatorship in the intellectual arena, show it to be an illegitimate power and contrary to culture, to creativity) (Gullar and Ridenti 2012, 23).

This moment is often understood in terms of a rupture. Gullar himself reflects that, just prior to the coup: “eu tinha abandonado a poesia de vanguarda; tinha passado um ano inteiro sem escrever nada” (I had abandoned avant-garde poetry; I had spent an entire year without writing a

thing) (Gullar and Ridenti 2012, 9). Instead, the poet focused on direct political action via his involvement with the CPC and other groups in the new capital. Later, he goes on to say: “tinha participado da luta; tinha ido para a cadeia e aí veio o golpe, e aí escrevo um poema, porque eu já sou um poeta político, participante e a minha vida é aquilo” (I had taken part in the struggle; I had gone to jail and then the coup happened, and I wrote a poem, because I was already a political poet, a participant, and that was my life) (Gullar and Ridenti 2012, 9).

As this trajectory suggests, Gullar’s theoretical reflections were always grounded in praxis—political and well as poetic. And for Gullar, both the political and the poetic can be understood as rooted in experience, a word whose Portuguese cognate also carries the meaning, “experiment.” Gullar’s neoconcrete poetry emphasized its relations with sensory experience, and his political poetry arose from his concurrent experience with real politics. There is thus a possibility, as with Gullar’s redefinition (but not rejection) of the term “avant-garde,” of encapsulating both Gullar’s formally inventive poetry and his politically committed poetry within the domain of experimental writing. In other words, there is a possibility for understanding committed and formally experimental poetics not as two halves of an indissoluble impasse, but as differently defined modes of experimentation. Furthermore, each of these approaches to poetry can be understood as sharing an investment in decolonial politics.

Gullar’s turn toward more overtly political poetry accompanied his political growth, but the poet’s route into partied politics was somewhat unconventional. He recalls that he first became a Marxist after reading “a book titled *The Thought of Karl Marx*, by a French Catholic priest, Jean-Yves Calvez” (Gullar 2012, 87). As Gullar describes: “the first part of the book was a genuine analysis of Marx’s thought, and the second part demonstrated the impossibility, for a Catholic, of converting to Marxism. Except that since I’m not religious, I read only the first part

and became a Marxist” (Gullar 2012, 87). This might be interpreted as Gullar adopting a political-theoretical framework from outside of Brazil, but as he describes, “a existência do socialismo no mundo tinha tornado possível que as antigas colônias, como por exemplo os países africanos, pudessem se libertar do colonialismo e do imperialismo e tentar um caminho próprio” (socialism’s existence in the world made it possible for the old colonies, for example African countries, to liberate themselves from colonialism and imperialism and attempt a path of their own) (Gullar and Ridenti 2012, 38). Marxism in Brazil, then, was also an avenue for decolonial work.

Marxism provided Gullar with a framework for understanding “the necessity of social transformation for Brazil” (Gullar 2012, 87), something that comes across in *Avant-Garde and Underdevelopment*, which not only argues for just such a transformation in the domain of the arts, but also adopts a dialectical structure of thought. When Gullar joined the Brazilian Communist Party after the coup, it was because he saw it as “a good vehicle for resistance against the dictatorship” (Gullar 2012, 97). By 1970 he had been elected director of the Party in the state of Rio de Janeiro, a position would bring with it an increasing level of scrutiny from the dictatorial regime and would eventually force the poet to go underground, and then into exile. This entailed eight months of hiding in Brazil, two years of study in the Soviet Union, and a tour through Chile, Peru, and Argentina, where, almost uncannily, he was witness to both the Chilean and the Argentine coups.⁷

During this period of confrontation coinciding with the installation of three Latin American dictatorships (1962-1975), Gullar wrote the poetry that would be compiled as *Dentro da noite veloz* (*Within the Speeding Night*). The collection takes its name from an eight-part poem about the night Che Guevara died. As that would suggest, Gullar’s poetic practice mirrored

his growing political investments during this period, and the collection's more discursive lyrical poems represent a significant formal departure from the kinds of experiments the poet conducted under the auspices of neoconcretism. As Gullar's theoretical program had also specified in *Avant-Garde and Underdevelopment*, these new poems examined the material conditions of life at the time in Brazil, addressing, among other concerns, child mortality, unjust wage systems, and state torture.

"Agosto 1964" (August 1964), dated to just a few months after the Brazilian military coup, reflects on the last two of these concerns. Alongside these reflections are auto-poetic considerations about Gullar's own history as a formally experimental poet.

Entre lojas de flores e de sapatos, bares,
mercados, butiques,
viajo
num ônibus Estrada de Ferro-Leblon.
Volto do trabalho, a noite em meio,
Fatigado de mentiras.

O ônibus sacoleja. Adeus, Rimbaud,
relógio de lilases, concretismo,
neoconcretismo, ficções da juventude, adeus,
que a vida
eu a compro à vista aos donos do mundo.
Ao peso dos impostos, o verso sufoca,
a poesia agora responde a inquérito policial-militar.

Digo adeus à ilusão
mas não ao mundo. Mas não à vida,
meu reduto e meu reino.
Do salário injusto,
da punição injusta,
da humilhação, da tortura,
do terror,
retiramos algo e com ele construímos um artefato

um poema
uma bandeira (Gullar 2013a, 31)

(August 1964

Amid florists, shoe stores, bars
markets, boutiques,

I ride

on the Train Station — Leblon bus.
I return from work, in the middle of the night,
exhausted by the lies.

The bus lurches. Good-bye Rimbaud,
lilac clock, concretism,
neoconcretism, fictions of my youth, good-bye,
for life
I now pay cash to the owners of the earth.
The burden of taxes smothers the word,
and poetry answers to inquests of the military police.

I say good-bye to illusion
but not to the world. But not to life,
my redoubt is my kingdom.
From unjust wages
from unjust punishment
from humiliation, from torture
from terror,
we gain something and from it we create an artifact

a poem
a banner) (Gullar 2013b, 103-104)

In this poem, it's evident that Gullar is making use of poetry as a vehicle for political expression—critiquing the injustices of the newly installed dictatorship, and calling for poetic action. This poem also contrasts its call with the poet's earlier, formal experimentation, now the "fictions of my youth." It would seem, then, that this poem represents a poetic version of the transformation that takes place within Gullar's thinking as there is now there is no place for concretisms, old or neo, depicted here as the artifacts of a prior time (and place, Rimbaud's presence suggests). Poetics a few months into Brazil's dictatorship will now be an art of facts—the world, life, torture, and terror.

“August 1964,” unlike Gullar’s neoconcrete poetry, is lyrical and employs the expressive possibilities of language. It partakes of the kind of approach to poetry Gullar describes as ideal in *Avant-Garde and Underdevelopment* by being a poem that “nos leva diretamente à realidade comum” (takes us directly to the common reality) experienced by Gullar and other Brazilians living, in August 1964, under state oppression (1978, 87). Broadly speaking, poems from this collection, including this one, are in keeping with Gullar’s redefinition of the avant-garde from one defined by formal experimentation to one grounded in the material realities of life in Brazil, and in search of an emancipatory politics.

At the same time, this poem does maintain certain affinities with Gullar’s neoconcrete poetry. For instance, this poem demonstrates a sustained interest in the material features of language. Although written in verse line (a tactic largely excluded from concrete and neoconcrete experimentalisms), this poem nevertheless makes use of a visually striking layout. Similarly, though it departs from a poetic mode that incorporated other, nonlinguistic materials, instead working (especially in the first stanza) to plainly describe material reality in Brazil, its last lines straddle that divide. There, Gullar suggests that the poem itself *is* a banner, proposing a different facet of the relationship poetry might have with a material object. Rather than construct itself *of* material objects, here the poem suggests that it might signify in the manner of a banner, or flag. This is a political object with real materiality, but also a symbol for carrying and fighting for a political cause.

“August 1964” represents a revision, but not a rejection, of the ways in which Gullar, throughout his career, experimented with the relationships between poetry, participation, and materiality/ism. While his most formally experimental poem, the “Buried Poem,” made use of material objects (including the reader) to actually construct the poem, this poem suggests another

way in which poetry can relate to the material world. This happens when the poem describes the commercial features of the Rio de Janeiro cityscape. It cites (and sites itself among) “lojas de flores e de sapatos, bares” (florists, shoe stores, bars) that Gullar, as the speaker and author of the poem, sees out the window of a familiar Rio bus route. These features, along with explicit references to the horrors of the newly-installed dictatorship, have the effect of ensuring the poem is grounded in the lived experience of Brazil.

At the same time, Brazil’s historical situation informs the material form of the poem itself, whose lines “lurch” just like the bus that opens the second stanza. In this way, the poem demonstrates its ability to operate as a link between the material world, material form, and historical *materialism*. “São os fatos, a História, que criam as formas, e não o contrário” (It’s facts, History, that make the form, and not the other way around), Gullar writes in *Avant-Garde and Underdevelopment* (1978, 21). This poem represents one such form, formed on the basis of just such historical facts.

All of these facts are drawn from Gullar’s experience living and practicing politics and poetics in Brazil, and they contribute to a politically committed poetry that does manage to fulfill many of the proposals laid out in *Avant-Garde and Underdevelopment*. The poems are rooted in and specific to Brazil’s contemporary historical and political situation. They emphasize the problems faced by the country and its inhabitants by being, in many ways, poem-banners calling a committed vanguard to action. For example, in another poem from the collection, the “Poema Brasileiro” (Brazilian Poem), Gullar repeats and rearranges via changing line breaks the following phrase across three stanzas: “No Piauí de cada 100 crianças que nascem 78 morrem antes de completar 8 anos de idade” (In Piauí, of every 100 children born 78 will die before their 8th birthday) (Gullar 2013a, 17).⁸ The final stanza repeats the line “antes de completar 8 anos de

idade” (before their 8th birthday) four times. This poem makes an effective, affective case for the children dying in the Northeastern region of Brazil near to where Gullar grew up. It is also an extremely straightforward poem, distilled to just a single phrase, whose rearrangement and repetition contributes to its impact as a poem and a poetic call to arms. It doesn’t leave behind Gullar’s longstanding interest in poetic form but allows the urgency of the facts it recounts to build the form of the poem, repeating the sickening statistic as a means of ensuring the reader cannot ignore it.

The ways in which the “Brazilian Poem” rearranges a brief phrase for poetic effect suggests an affinity with Gullar’s earlier formal experimentation. Concrete poetry, the recipient of so much of Gullar’s criticism in *Avant-Garde and Underdevelopment*, often relied on the kind of spatial rearrangement of poetic content that surfaces in the “Brazilian Poem,” if to a different effect. This poem does suggest, then, another way in which Gullar’s politically-committed period might overlap with the formally-experimental period that preceded it. Similarly, the poems in *Dentro da noite veloz*, constructed on the basis of historical facts, can also be understood as maintaining a dedication to experience that might help us reconsider the politics of Gullar’s earlier, more formally experimental writing as well.

In *Avant-Garde and Underdevelopment*, Gullar remarks briefly on “o radicalismo do movimento de arte participante, que punha de lado toda a problemática estética e fazia da poesia, do teatro, do cinema, meros instrumentos de ação política e de denúncia” (the radicalism of the movement in participatory art, that set aside the aesthetic question and made poetry, theater, cinema into mere instruments of political action and denunciation). Here, he is discussing the creative activities of the CPC, the leftist cultural group he was involved with in Brasília in the lead up to the coup. While the direct outreach to the people that characterized this

era of Gullar's poetic practice was relatively brief, the participatory aspects of these activities speaks to another common thread between Gullar's earlier formally experimental poetics under neoconcretism and the politically engaged writing he would pursue in the years that followed. Neoconcrete works came into being by way of participation. The scale of this participation was quite small in comparison with the kinds of outreach the CPC engaged in, or in comparison with the kind of impact Gullar's later poetry would have, but it can nevertheless be understood as sharing an investment in the direct, engaged action of an audience who is now no longer external to the activity of poet or poem.

Gullar's experiments with poetic participation and sense experience can also be understood as establishing a framework for the decolonial poetic practice eventually emphasized in his politically committed writing. Vazquez and Mignolo describe how "decolonial aesthetics starts from the consciousness that the modern/colonial project has implied not only control of the economy, the political, and knowledge, but also control over the senses and perception" (2013). This reminder is useful in thinking about the formally experimental poetry Gullar made in the context of neoconcretism. His then-emphasis on sensing poetry can be understood as a phenomenologically-invested practice in participatory artwork, largely distanced from the kinds of participatory politics later prioritized during his association with the CPC and the Communist Party. But, at the same time, poems such as the "Buried Poem" also perform a number of decolonizing gestures that Vazquez and Mignolo point to in their discussion of decolonial aesthetics. Of these, the foremost is to locate the poem in the sensory experience of the reader. This both disrupts inherited forms of reading and positions the work in an extremely local sense. Because the reader is not a single entity, a poem such as the "Buried Poem" is also, in Vazquez and Mignolo's words, "a space open to the plurality of alternatives" (2013). For Gullar's

experiments with participatory poetry, these alternatives include those made possible by each of the readers able to physically engage the poem and who, as opposed to readers of lyrical poetry, contribute vital components to its construction as well. In the case of the “Buried Poem,” the poem is also open to the conditions of its location in Brazil, in Rio, in the garden of Hélio Oiticica’s family home. When the work was eventually rained out, this showed its openness, even, to its own destruction by the very space in which it was constructed.

Part of the aim of decolonial aesthetics, as Vazquez and Mignolo describe, is to de-Westernize ways of “understanding and relating to the world” (2013). This is precisely the activity Gullar undertakes with regard to the concept of the avant-garde in *Avant-Garde and Underdevelopment*. In the text, the poet argues for an understanding of the avant-garde as one that “coincide com o surgimento, na Europa do século XVIII, de uma nova força social – a burguesia” (coincides with the rise, in 18th century Europe, of a new social force—the bourgeoisie) (1978, 28), locating it in a specific geo-historical situation. Revealing the avant-garde to be an historically-located, Western concept, is the first step in Gullar’s proposal that international art be redefined on the basis of a dialectic with national art practices. These practices encompass, in the case of “underdeveloped” countries, politically committed and emancipatory poetic practices such as those Gullar develops in the period surrounding his witnessing of the Brazilian, Chilean, and Argentine coups and subsequent dictatorships. But, Gullar’s formally experimental writing during the neoconcrete period also proposes a counter to what Mignolo and Vazquez call “the universal validity claims” of the avant-garde by grounding itself (in the actual ground, in the case of the “Buried Poem”) in Brazil, by reorienting the ways in which poetry can be perceived, and by resisting usurpation by a falsely universal international art that might have the effect of uprooting the work from its Brazilian context (2013). Because

the work is singular and, unlike the printed book, actually unable to circulate, it inevitably insists that the local be preserved.

This obviously differs from the ways in which Gullar's politically committed poetry registers the material conditions of life in Brazil. But both poetic approaches are committed to prioritizing the Brazilian experience—be it the small-scale sensory experiences facilitated by the neoconcrete poem, or the large-scale experiences of those living under political and economic repression as recounted in a collection like *Dentro da noite veloz*. Together, these gestures can be understood as two versions of a broader decolonial arc within Gullar's poetry that unites the experimental and the engagé through a prolonged, if evolving, poetic investment in participation and experience.

Notes

I am grateful to André Keiji Kunigami for his invaluable feedback on an earlier draft of this article.

1. Brothers Haroldo and Augusto de Campos, together with Décio Pignatari, were the primary practitioners and theorists of concrete poetry in Brazil. Because they share a last name, I will here refer to Haroldo and Augusto by their first names.

2. Unless otherwise noted, English translations of citations appearing here in their original Portuguese are my own.

3. The Portuguese, “erva” might also be translated as “herb” in English, but translator Leland Guyer’s choice of “grass” and its repeating “gr” is happily replicates concrete poetry’s emphasis on sonic and visual patterning.

4. It’s important to note that Gullar’s rather severe characterization of concrete poetry does not account for the ways the movement in concrete poetry itself grew and changed in relationship to shifting socio-political circumstances in Brazil. For example, following the more mathematical, geometric, and formalist phase of the movement, the years 1962-1966 saw, as Gonzalo Aguilar describes, a participatory or militant phase of concrete poetry which “puso de relieve las contradicciones entre la autonomía de la forma poética y la inmediatez política” (highlighted the contradictions between the autonomy of poetic form and political immediacy) (2003, 374). As Adam Shellhorse describes, this phase included, for example “references to the Brazilian military coup of March 1964, which stifled the Left’s ascent, and to the Cuban revolution.”

5. I have written about the materiality of Gullar’s neoconcrete poetry, and its relationships with phenomenology and conceptual art elsewhere. See “On the Matter of the Concept: Ferreira Gullar’s Relational Poetics,” *Luso-Brazilian Review* 54, no. 2 (2017).

6. Gullar speaks generally of “underdeveloped countries” throughout the essay, but Brazil is his primary case study.

7. It was in Argentina that Gullar wrote his most well-known poem, “Poema sujo” (Dirty poem), one that afforded him a certain level of notoriety at home. Eventually this facilitated his return to Brazil, where, according to Gullar, he was protected from disappearance by the military thanks in part to the fame generated by this poem.

8. My translation. This poem does not appear in the collected poems translated by Leland Guyer.

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